

VZCZCXRO8636  
PP RUEHDE RUEHDIR RUEHROV  
DE RUEHRH #0292 0421447  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 111447Z FEB 09  
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0167  
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE  
RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE  
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC

UNCLAS RIYADH 000292

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP(HARRIS) AND NEA/RA(SCOVITCH)  
STATE PASS TO USTR FOR JASON BUNTIN  
USDOC FOR TYLER HOFFMAN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [SOCI](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: ROSES ARE RED, AND BLACKLISTED: SAUDI ARABIA NOT  
FEELING THE LOVE ON VALENTINE'S DAY

REF: 01 RIYADH 397

1.(SBU) For the eighth consecutive year, Saudi Arabia has banned articles related to the romantic holiday of St. Valentine's Day. Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh (the Kingdom's pre-eminent cleric) issued a fatwa in 2001 declaring Valentine's Day a "pagan Christian holiday" and prohibiting its celebration under the premise that the celebration is un-Islamic and that it encourages people out of wedlock to have "immoral" relationships. In particular, the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV aka. Muttawa'in aka. Religious Police) have banned the sale of anything red in shops, especially roses.

12. (SBU) Press reports indicated that florists and shop owners were warned the first week of February to remove all scarlet merchandise from their shelves. In 2008, shops reported being visited by the CPVPV who were making the rounds to ensure compliance. At the time, an agent of the CPVPV said to the press "the West exports to us habits and feats which contradict shari'a and wants us to imitate them. We want to make sure that shari'a is implemented, and we will punish anyone who commits or abets a violation."

13. (SBU) Al-Jazira reported on February 8 that the Ministry of Education (MoE) would begin an awareness campaign for students warning them against celebrating Valentine's Day.

14. (SBU) The effects of the Valentine's Day ban are multiple. Many young lovers are forced to travel to neighboring countries such as Bahrain or the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where many hotels and restaurants are offering Valentine's Day promotions, and red candies and teddy bears line the shelves of stores. Those staying in the Kingdom often ordered their bouquets days or weeks in advance, and one florist told the Saudi Gazette "Sometimes we deliver the bouquets in the middle of the night to early morning, to avoid suspicion." The black market is also blooming; price increases of up to 600% are also reported for red roses.

15. (SBU) Comment: The stridency of the campaign against Valentine's Day reflects the unease of conservatives in the religious establishment who are being challenged both by social trends and perhaps also broader distaste at a distinctly Western, commercialized holiday. End Comment.  
MUENCH